



The “New Warfare” and the New American Calculus of War

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1. Introduction

One legacy of the 20th century’s great conflicts was the emergence of a general societal presumption against war: the simple idea that war should be an instrument of last and infrequent resort. Although this lesson came at a very high price, it has proved difficult to retain. Especially since the end of the cold war, the idea has been in retreat. A new cost-benefit calculus is at work in American policy discourse and practice -- one accepting a lowered threshold for the use of force as an instrument of US policy.

Important in shaping this development was the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of global superpower conflict. This geostrategic revolution elevated America’s relative power position to one of distinct military primacy and it mitigated concerns about the possibility that regional intervention might escalate to the level of an all-consuming nuclear conflagration.

Also important in altering America’s war calculus has been the putative “revolution in military affairs” (or “RMA”) which is associated with developments in the field of information technology. RMA capabilities are supposed to give the United States the capacity to fight regional wars surgically and to conclude them rapidly with minimal casualties and collateral

damage. Much as the geostrategic revolution served to relax concerns about war escalation, emergent RMA capabilities have served to mitigate the fear that regional intervention might lead to “quagmires” reminiscent of the Vietnam War.

2. The new calculus of war

The initial transition to a post-Cold War practice of intervention occurred during 1989-1993 -- a period spanning the Panama invasion, Persian Gulf War, and Somalia operations. President George Bush outlined the rudiments of a new doctrine in his 5 January 1993 West Point valedictory address. The speech avoided “last resort” language with regard to the use of force, adopting a simple utilitarian framework instead: it proposed that force could be a preferred option when other approaches were not thought to be as likely to work or work as well. This type of calculation, which does not require that alternatives actually be attempted and exhausted, is standard with regard to many other types of policy instruments. By contrast, the “last resort” principle treats warfare as a unique type of instrument whose potential negative impact on the international system cannot be represented adequately in a narrow or short-term cost-benefit calculation. By adopting such a calculus to govern the use of force, the new framework diminished the special status of military operations and relaxed the presumption against war.

A simplified “cost-benefit” approach to employing force has guided all three post-Cold War US administrations -- although they have differed significantly on other issues bearing on military operations. The points of difference have included the importance of multilateralism, the definition of “national interest” (narrow *versus* broad), the propriety of using the armed forces for humanitarian and peace operations, and the effectiveness of limited applications of force. The present administration, especially since the September 11 attacks, is distinguished by a more unilateralist disposition than its predecessors, a re-emphasis on traditional combat and warfighting missions, and an inclination toward more ambitious military objectives -- notably, regime removal.

With the exception of the Somalia operations (1992-1993), the US experience in military contingencies between 1989 and 2001 may give American leaders greater confidence that they can circumvent or preclude the two dangers -- uncontrolled escalation and protracted stalemate -- that had inspired reservations about the use of force during much of the Cold War period. But there are other, longer-term consequences to lowering the threshold on the use of force that are also worthy of consideration:

- Regional conflicts may not presently risk sudden, inadvertent escalation to general nuclear war, but an increased resort to force can contribute to global repolarization and remilitarization -- that is, a return to true Cold War conditions. This prospect should be weighed when contemplating war for reasons other than defense of vital interests and it should be a factor in calculating the mode and magnitude of any forceful action.

- The risk of America becoming mired in a Vietnam-style quagmire is much reduced today -- but neither the Vietnam War, nor the Korean War before it, exhaust the forms that a “quagmire” might take. The pre-history of the First World War suggests another type: a self-constituting or emergent quagmire. The dynamic that swept 15 nations into the Great War developed almost imperceptibly over 35 years -- through interlocking military pacts, minor wars, colonial competitions, multiple interventions, and arms races -- before reaching a catastrophe point and suddenly engulfing its participants. And every step of the pre-war journey, except the last ones, seemed manageable to the nations that were taking them. Notably, the precipitating incident was an act of state-supported terrorism involving Serbia and Austria-Hungary.

These types of “over the horizon” risks barely register in today’s cost-benefit calculus. They are especially difficult to appreciate from America’s current vantage point of distinct military primacy. But they reflect the type of dynamics that may eventually undermine that primacy or increase dramatically the cost of exercising it. To appreciate these risks requires gauging (and projecting) the effects of the new norms and practices on global military competition, regional and global stability, and international system dynamics (for example, alliance behavior). Some of these effects are already discernable in the aftermath of the Afghanistan war. Of course, a longer-term view would be more revealing; a fruitful case study might be US military engagement in the “arc of crisis” stretching from South Asia, through the Persian Gulf, to the Middle East during the period 1980-2001. Also instructive might be an examination of the interplay between US military policy and Russian, Chinese, and Indian policy during the post-Cold War period. What is certain is that a simple cost-benefit analysis of war options cannot tell us the true, long-term cost of lowering the threshold on military action -- no more than the current price of timber, water, or oil can tell us the true cost of depleting scarce resources.

3. The new warfare

As noted above, a principal factor that has shaped change in the norms governing military activism is the putative “Revolution in Military Affairs”. Prominent among the operational expressions of the RMA are new capabilities for (i) “standoff” precision attack (which encompasses the air power revolution) and for (ii) information warfare (which, roughly speaking, combines electronic and computer or “cyber” warfare). Precision standoff attack and information warfare capabilities are supposed to give the United States the capacity to not only rapidly dominate today’s battlefields but also “leap over” the battlefield and directly engage an adversary’s will and political power. This involves attacking so-called “political targets” as well as strategic infrastructure, communication, and industrial targets.

In sum: America’s emerging RMA capabilities allow for a new form of strategic warfare in which precision conventional weapons and offensive information operations can substitute for the mass strategic bombardment campaigns (nuclear or conventional) that figured in pre-1980

wars and war plans. And the new strategic warfare capabilities are supposed to be relevant not only to full-scale war, but also to more limited enterprises, such as coercive bargaining. Thus they allow a lowered threshold for the use of force across a broad range of contingencies.

Two final elements of the new warfare are supposedly derivative of the recent conflict in Afghanistan: (i) a new emphasis on covert and special operations, and (ii) a renewed willingness to form short-term partnerships with indigenous groups -- often ethnic militia -- and employ them groups as proxy combatants or political agents. This innovation -- actually a revival of practices common during the Cold War -- is supposed to address shortcomings obvious in the 1999 Balkans campaign, Operation Allied Force, namely: the lack of a US ground troop presence and human intelligence assets.

4. The poverty of analysis: a splendid little war?

All variety of laudatory claims have been made concerning the operational effectiveness and limited collateral effects of the new warfare. In the media depictions, the Afghan war was a "bulls-eye war" (*Washington Post*, 12/02/01), a "finely-tuned war" (*Christian Science Monitor*, 11/21/01), a "stealth war" (*USA Today*, 09/27/01), and a "low-risk war" (*NYT*, 12/19/01). It was characterized by "pinpoint bombing" (*Washington Post*, 12/02/01) and "information-heavy combat weapons" (*Boston Globe*, 11/26/01) that were "precise at hitting targets" (*Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, 10/09/01) and "built to swiftly find and destroy" (*Los Angeles Times*, 10/01/01) an elusive foe. The verdict of the US media regarding the new warfare was almost unanimous: "Technology brings new style of warfare" (*Baltimore Sun*, 12/17/01); "War in Afghanistan demonstrates air power's new ability" (*Associated Press*, 12/19/01); "Pinpoint Air Power Comes of Age in New War" (*NYT*, 12/24/01); and "High-tech US Arsenal Proves its Worth" (*Boston Globe*, 12/09/01).

But these claims characteristically fail to look beyond short-term achievements and near-term effects. The public discourse on recent wars has tended to focus on technological features, tactical challenges, and proximal political gains (such as defeat of the Taliban). These are often insulated analytically from the broader or longer-term effects of war -- for instance, its chaotic aftermath, impact on regional stability, and affect on other conflicts (such as the Afghan war's affect on the India-Pakistan and Israeli-Palestinian disputes). Much of the commentary on the new warfare fails to appreciate that war, as an act of state policy, is not about material destruction, *per se*, nor even about a succession of battlefield successes. It is about strategic outcomes, broadly considered.

Even regarding tactical and operational issues, much of the current commentary and open analysis fails to enlighten:

- First, claims about the new warfare are seldom usefully disaggregated. Thus, for instance, assertions about the effectiveness and toll of the Afghan air campaign fail to distinguish between the relative value and cost of attacks on military and

battlefield targets *versus* attacks on cities and political, industrial, and infrastructural targets. However, such distinctions are critical to finding ways to reduce the inadvertent, collateral effects of war.

- Second, assessments of the new warfare have tended to be more anecdotal than systematic. And seldom have the operations in Afghanistan been openly analyzed in a meaningful comparative framework. Thus, the high percentage of guided munitions used in the Afghan air campaign is supposed to make it the most accurate of such efforts in history. Overlooked is the fact that *the rate of civilian casualties per bomb dropped was higher in Afghanistan than in the 1999 Kosovo war*, probably by a factor of two or three. This is an interesting paradox that can only be explained by looking more closely at the distinct nature and goals of the air campaign in Afghanistan. Doing so can reveal why increased precision and accuracy does not necessary lead to fewer civilian casualties or less collateral damage.
- Finally, treatments of the new warfare have tended to be ahistorical. Much of what has been heralded as new is not new at all, but has precedents that are rich in lessons. The tactical alliance with indigenous Afghan ethnic militias, for instance, finds a precedent in American cooperation with the Kosovo Liberation Army during the 1999 Operation Allied Force. An even more appropriate precursor is US cooperation with the Afghan mujahedin during the anti-Soviet war of the 1970s and 1980s.

The poverty of analysis that has characterized treatments of the Afghan war and the “new warfare” generally may be a symptom of the trauma suffered by the United States on September 11, 2001. Or it may be that military analysis was more disciplined and critical during the Cold War because the price of error was so clear, high, and immediate. Whatever its reason, the permissiveness of today’s discourse is antithetical to the development of sound policy.

In order to serve policy, assessments of the new warfare must define and disaggregate its elements and view them in historical and comparative perspective. Moreover, the various elements of the new warfare must be assessed in terms their effects *broadly considered*. Criteria of military effectiveness must be applied to the individual elements of the new warfare. Beyond this we need to assess short- and long-term collateral effects, the impact of the new warfare on the international norms governing war, and its effects on global military competition (including attempts to acquire weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery.)

There is already some reason to doubt the ability of the new warfare to resolve the most trenchant difficulties attending war. Its limits are suggested by the paradox of precision attack leading to chaotic results (examined in the next section). And there is reason for concern

about how some features of the new warfare may affect the norms governing the conduct of war -- specifically, the normative distinction between civilian and military personnel and targets (examined in the final section).

5. Precision attack, chaotic outcomes

The techniques and technologies that the United States employed in Afghanistan allowed it to intervene rapidly and pursue quite ambitious operational objectives. They also permitted the operation to proceed on a more unilateral basis than had been the case in either the Balkans or Persian Gulf conflicts. Within two months the operation succeeded in one of its immediate goals -- removal of the Taliban regime; a remarkable achievement given the relative weakness of America's pre-war military presence in central Asia. However, success in toppling the Taliban was accompanied by various unanticipated and undesirable outcomes.

Post-Taliban Afghanistan quickly slipped into a miasma of warlordism, criminality, and multiple ethnic conflicts. Related to this, Pakistani and Iranian cooperation with the United States grew thin and the United States became implicated in local Afghan conflicts. Subsequently, leading elements of the Al Qaeda terrorist network -- the principal culprits of the September 11 attack - were able to slip the US noose. More broadly, the Afghan conflict itself slipped the limits that America had hoped to impose, contributing to dangerous escalation in the Kashmir and Israeli-Palestinian disputes.

These developments suggest an underlying dynamic that is "chaotic". Put simply: the import of America's battlefield and political victory in Afghanistan was refigured by interlocking feedback loops involving multiple state and non-state actors in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. The negative, inadvertent outcomes of the war could have been limited by means of better, more deliberate pre-war diplomatic and political preparation. This is one of the functions of diplomacy: to dampen the chaotic repercussions of war. *But the seductive promise of the new warfare is that it allows the United States to circumvent many of the constraints typically imposed by diplomacy and coalition warfare.* And, indeed, the United States was able to achieve several immediate campaign goals despite the difficulties of the theater and the tentative character of the allied coalition. The hidden price of this achievement came later -- in the chaos and conflict that followed the collapse of the Taliban. No amount of precision in the delivery of ordinance is likely to curb the broader, chaotic outcomes of war.

6. The new warfare: disappearing "the civilian"?

As noted above, several elements of the new warfare constitute forms of strategic attack. By means of "precision" bombardment or cyber-weapons, such attacks focus on centers of political authority and sources of national strength (including industry, communications, and economic infrastructure). The impact (both short-term and long) on civilian populations of strategic attack can be profound -- even when extraordinary measures are taken to limit immediate collateral damage. Strategic warfare inherently blurs the distinction between "the

military” and “the civilian,” placing exceptional demands on precision attack and intelligence capabilities. As these capabilities have improved, the goals of strategic conventional attack have grown more ambitious in lockstep. Thus, the trend toward reduced civilian casualties apparent between the Gulf War (1990-1991) and Balkans operations (1996-1999) seems to have been reversed in the Afghan war.

The current emphasis on strategic bombardment is deeply embedded in US air power doctrine, yet the proposition that such attacks have been vital to recent victories does not find strong empirical support. The Gulf War Air Power Survey explicitly challenged it and it was disputed during the Kosovo war as well. As noted earlier, most open-source treatments of the Afghan war have not attempted this level of analysis. Nonetheless, the chronology of the war and the phasing of the air campaign suggest that battlefield air attacks (in conjunction with ground force operations), not urban attacks, were key in routing the Taliban.

The increasing role of special operations troops and covert operatives, and the increased dependence on indigenous ethnic militias, may also have the effect of blurring the military-civilian boundary. In addition, the use of ethnic militias or other local irregular troops as proxies raises issue of control and accountability. In the aftermath of the Afghan war, some elements of the Northern Alliance may have committed grave and systematic breeches of the Geneva Conventions, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross and several human rights organizations. At minimum, this could reflect badly on the United States and tarnish the moral authority of the war against terrorism.

The demise of the Soviet Union elevated America to a position of unparalleled global military superiority. Today the United States accounts for more than forty percent of world defense spending. In the shadow of the 11 September attacks, US military power may seem more relevant than ever. But America’s preponderance of military power does not settle the question of how to employ this instrument or when. Nor does it tell us how best to balance this instrument with others in order to meet today’s unique challenges. Although these questions are urgent ones, we cannot hope to answer them wisely without a better accounting of both the “new warfare” and the dynamics associated with military activism in the new era.

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